Hybrid Threats: Cartel and Gang Links to Illicit Global Networks

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Abstract

Transnational Organized Crime exploits the complex relationships of local and global networks comprised of a range of criminal cartels, mafias, gangs, and corrupt state actors. This article will look at the links among these criminal enterprises and state actors, at municipal, sub-state, and state levels in Latin America to frame the contours of this segment of the global illicit political economy. The networks of alliances and co-operation among criminal cartels, transnational gangs, mafias, and state actors will be assessed. This includes criminal alliances of cartels and gangs with global mafias, the presence of criminal governance, transnational (and third generation) gangs, and links with hybrid threats and influence operations involving state actors. Examples will be drawn from Mexico, Central America, Venezuela, and Brazil. These examples will look at global links between cartels and gangs with transnational mafia such as the 'Ndrangheta, as well as the use of strategic crime and corruption by states such as Russia, China, and Iran. Methods include a mix of quantitative methods, such as social network analysis (SNA), and qualitative cases studies.

Keywords: global criminal networks, state actors, Latin America, global mafias, transnational mafias

Amenazas híbridas: vínculos de carteles y pandillas con redes globales ilícitas

Resumen

El crimen organizado transnacional explota las complejas relaciones de las redes locales y globales compuestas por una variedad de cárteles criminales, mafias, pandillas y actores estatales corruptos. Este artículo analizará los vínculos entre estas empresas criminales y los actores estatales, a nivel municipal, subestatal y estatal en América Latina para enmarcar los contornos de este segmento de la economía política ilícita global. Se evaluarán las redes de alianzas y cooperación entre cárteles criminales, pandillas transnacionales, mafias y actores estatales. Esto incluye alianzas criminales de cárteles y pandillas con mafias globales, la presencia de gobernanza criminal, pandillas transnacionales (y de tercera generación) y vínculos con amenazas híbridas y operaciones de influencia que involucran a actores estatales. Se tomarán ejemplos de México, América Central, Venezuela y Brasil. Estos ejemplos analizarán los vínculos globales entre cárteles y pandillas con mafias transnacionales como la 'Ndrangheta, así como el uso del crimen estratégico y la corrupción por parte de estados como Rusia, China e Irán. Los métodos incluyen una combinación de métodos cuantitativos, como el análisis de redes sociales (SNA) y estudios de casos cualitativos.

Palabras clave: redes criminales globales, actores estatales, América Latina, mafias globales, mafias transnacionales

混合威胁：卡特尔和帮派与非法全球网络的联系

摘要

跨国有组织犯罪利用了由"一系列犯罪集团、黑手党、帮派和腐败的国家行动者"组成的本地及全球网络的复杂关系。本文将研究这些犯罪企业与国家行动者在拉丁美洲市政层面、地方层面和国家层面的联系，以勾勒出全球非法政治经济这一部分的轮廓。本文将评估犯罪集团、跨国帮派、黑手党和国家行动者之间的联盟网络与合作。这包括集团和帮派与全球黑手党组成的犯罪联盟、犯罪治理的存在、跨国（和第三代）帮派、以及与"涉及国家行动者的混合威胁和影响行动"的联系。本文将研究墨西哥、中美洲、委内瑞拉和巴西的案例。这些例子将研究集团和帮派与跨国黑手党（如"

光荣会”）之间的全球联系，以及俄罗斯、中国和伊朗等国家对战略犯罪和腐败的使用。方法包括多种定量方法（例如社会网络分析(SNA)）和定性案例研究。

关键词：全球犯罪网络，国家行动者，拉丁美洲，全球黑手党，跨国黑手党

Introduction

Hybrid threats come in many forms. Traditionally hybrid threats refer to actions taken by states to influence and weaken their adversaries using all means short of large-scale combat operations (LSCO) or war (armed conflict). In addition, hybrid threats can be used within situation of war to complement conventional military operations. Hybrid actions include sowing division and discontent, propaganda and disinformation, weakening state institutions through corruption, cyberattacks, and using organized crime and gangs as proxies (using drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking, and forced migration).[1] Of course gangs and criminal organizations (mafias and cartels) can wage hybrid 'war' for states or on their own behalf.[2] In this article we specifically look at criminal/illicit networks with a focus on Latin America. That means we will discuss criminal cartels, gangs, mafias, and their interaction with each other and states (including state and corporate actors). Corporate actors are often as important as state actors—corrupt state officials—since criminal enterprises often target businesses for extortion. In addition, many criminal gangs and cartels are essentially acting as 'criminal conglomerates.'[3]

Much discussion of transnational crime revolves around drug cartels or drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). This is understandable since the global trade in narcotics is lucrative and weakens states and favors a range of criminal actors.[4] This range is better described as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) due to their 'polycrime' nature, with extortion, resource extraction (oil, wildlife, timber, minerals), organized robberies (brigandage such as the *Novo Cangaço* in Brazil), piracy, human trafficking, etc. joining the drug trade.[5] These organizations operate at municipal, sub-state, and state (national) levels, as well as engaging in cross-border, regional, and international activities. Together, these transnational gangs,[6] cartels, and mafias form a constellation of criminal actors that results in a global illicit political economy[7] that is often characterized as 'deviant globalization.'[8]

Alliances are a key characteristic of the entities participating in the global illicit political economy. These alliances include links between gangs (range from first generation street gangs that focus on local turf protection, through market

gangs acting in a broader, often national spatial context through third generation gangs that operate on a transnational, hemispheric, or potentially global scale. These third generation gangs (see Figure 1) are also referred to as both territorial or transnational gangs that interact or form alliances with mafias and criminal cartels and thus can become global actors and influence sovereignty.[9]

limited	**Politicization**	evolved
local	**Internationalization**	global
1ᶦ Generation	2ⁿ Generation	3ᵈ generation
turf gang turf protection	drug gang market protection	mercenary gang power/financial acquisition
proto-netwarrior	emerging netwarrior	netwarrior
less sophisticated	**Sophistication**	more sophisticated

Source: John P. Sullivan ©1997/2018

Source: John P. Sullivan "Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels and Netwarriors," *Crime & Justice International*, Vol. 13, No. 9.2, October/November 1997 and John P. Sullivan, "Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels, and Net Warriors." *Transnational Organized Crime*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Autumn 1997, pp. 95-108; Table 1 at p. 96.

Figure 1: Third Generation Gang Typology

Together, these criminal enterprises can challenge states as criminal armed groups (CAGs),[10] as well as by altering the nature of sovereignty through a process of criminal insurgency including exercising territorial control, directly confronting the state, providing social goods, and asserting criminal governance.[11] These factors can usher in new forms of sovereignty requiring new policy and legal frameworks as criminal organizations interact with state actors to stimulate state[12] formation or transition and conduct influence operation, become engaged in crime wars, and assert political resolve through criminal governance.[13] The following case studies and discussion will illuminate these dynamics in Mexico, Central America, Brazil, and Venezuela. The next section will provide a more robust discussion of hybrid threat definitions in the literature.

Defining Hybrid Threats

There has been a general recognition following the end of the Cold War that the line between conventional and nonconventional threats and conflict was blurring.[14] In that milieu, many new conceptualizations of this blurry

new form of conflict involving a complex array of actors emerged such as Fourth Generation Warfare among many others.[15] In a seminal work in 2007, Hoffman promoted the concept of hybrid warfare[16] which would later be adapted into NATO strategic frameworks.[17] Hoffman defined hybrid wars (HW) as follows:

> Hybrid Wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multimodal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects.[18]

Thus, we see that from its inception the hybrid wars/warfare (HW) concept incorporated criminality and non-state actors. Further, Hoffmann used hybrid threats to denote the specific threats inherent in hybrid warfare and the prototypical threat actors such as his Hezbollah case study.[19] Scholars such as Chad Briggs later pointed to the nexus between climate security and hybrid warfare, wherein threat actors take advantage of new opportunities presented by climate change to foment instability amongst enemies and criminal actors which profit from changing climate conditions.[20] Recent scholarship has provided empirical examples of this such as organized crime involvement in water markets due to climate insecurity in Kenya and Mexico.[21]

In a conceptual essay on hybrid warfare definitions, Bankov makes a distinction between hybrid warfare schools of thought identifying the kinetic vs. non kinetic schools.[22] The non kinetic school includes situations in which *primarily* states engage in conflict below the threshold of war without a shot being fired and has been dominant post 2014 according to Bankov. We take no stance on this conceptual divide, noting our own case studies include alliances of state and non-state actors, and kinetic and non-kinetic forms of violence including IEDs of Mexican cartel actors and the tragic loss of life from the fentanyl trade and state regulatory inaction by state adversaries.[23] We add to this literature through the empirical contribution of relevant hybrid threat case studies and add rigor by pointing to the networked alliances amongst state and nonstate actors which function as hybrid warfare threat multipliers.

Case Studies

Mexico

Mexico is under considerable stress from gangs and criminal cartels. Insecurity, corruption, violence, and impunity challenge the state. A protean mix of cartels and

gangs are extant, competing with each other and the state. Scholars such as Weisz Argomedo have identified the role of the hybrid warfare concept in the Mexican non-state actor conflict setting.[24] Counterintuitively, it was the state action of the kingpin strategy that undermined a previously stable alliance structure, leading to increased conflict, violence, and a geographic clustering of violence in specific regions in Mexico.[25] Currently, the Cártel de Sinaloa (CDS) or Sinaloa Cartel and the Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) are the two major alliances dominating the illicit economy.[26] The CDS and CJNG are involved in a range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking and connect with criminal enterprises in the United States, Latin America, and beyond. External actors linking with Mexican cartels include The Mexican Mafia (Eme) in California and Barrio Azteca in Texas. Jones, Chindea, Weisz Argomedo, and Sullivan looked at the Sinaloa and CJNG alliance structures in a series of papers using a dataset from *Lantia Consultores*. Figures 2, 3, and 4 illustrate some of the findings of that social network analysis (SNA).[27]
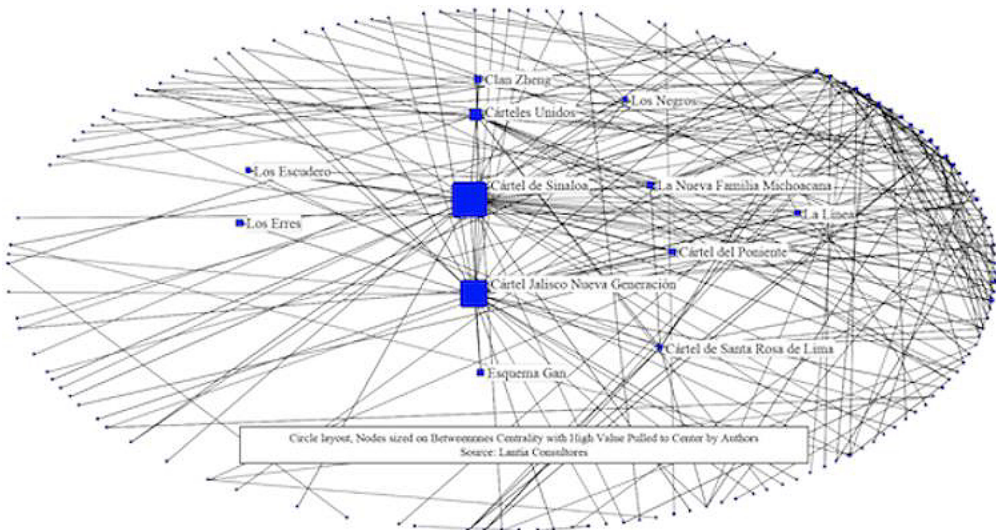
Figure 2: Entire alliance and subgroups organized crime network in Mexico (Source: Data from Lantia Consultores; by permission from Jones et. al. 2022)
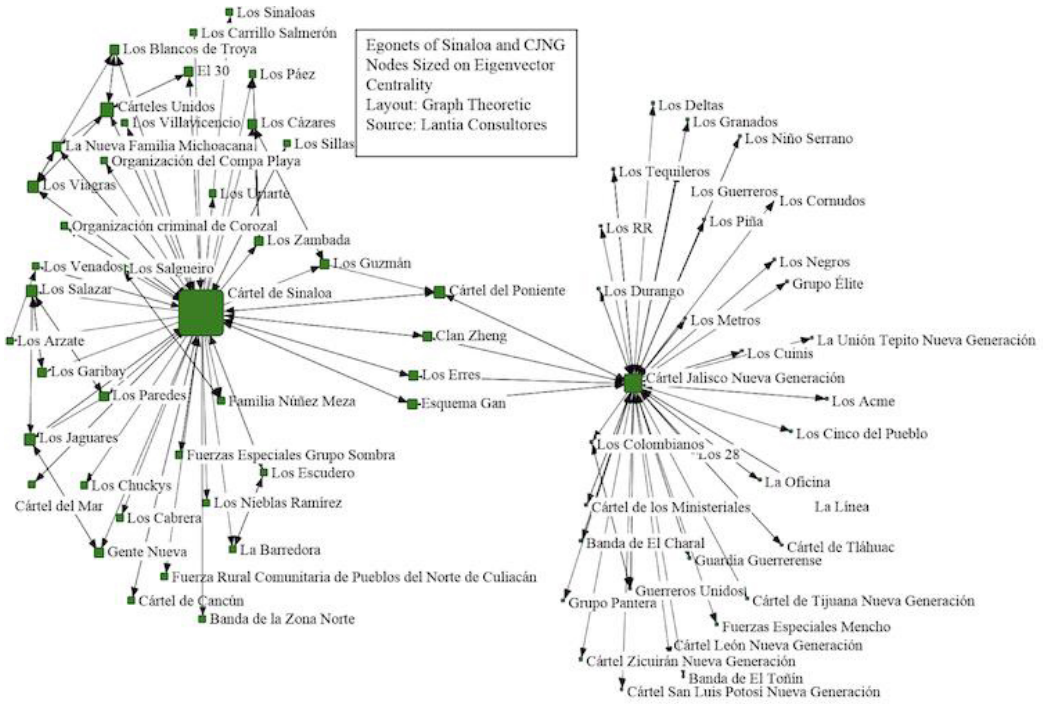
Figure 3: CJNG and Sinaloa Cartel Ego Networks (Source: Data from Lantia Consultores; by permission from Jones et. al. 2022)
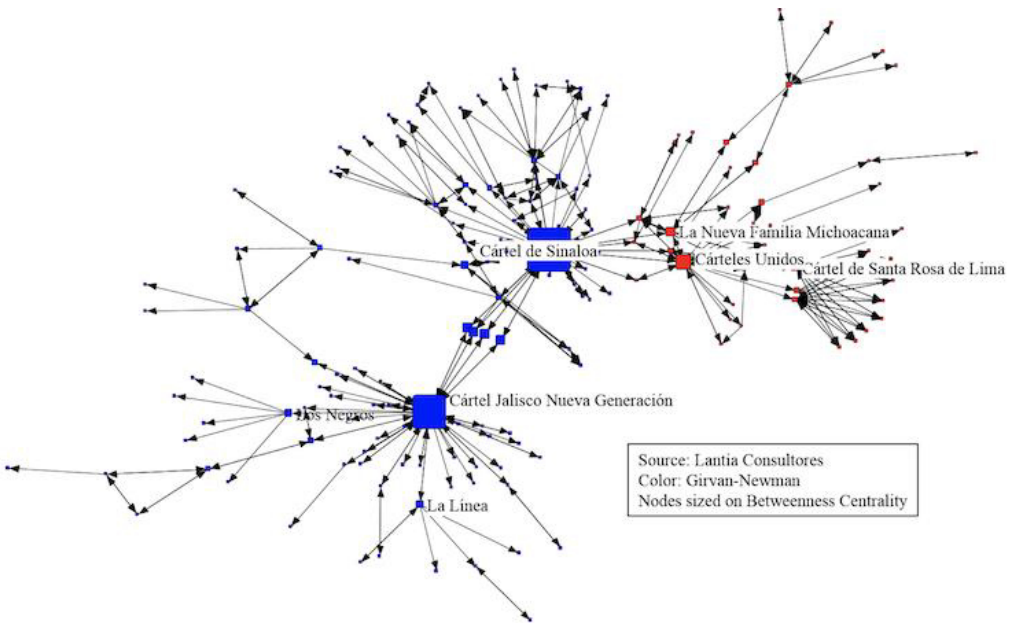
Figure 4: Network Main Component with Community Detection
(Source: Data from Lantia Consultores; by permission from Jones et. al. 2022)

The above figures 2-4 demonstrate a highly resilient organized crime system within Mexico which has evolved following kingpin strikes by the Mexican government.[28] This resilient system allows criminal armed groups (CAGs) in Mexico to, in some 'criminal enclaves,' provide complete criminal governance and be resilient nationally against Mexican state attempts to target them.[29] This resilient structure further undermines Mexican state capacity to address other social and security issues.

Central America

Central America, especially the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) has become a hub of transnational gang activity with *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13), and Barrio 18 (18th Street) gangs (or *maras*) dominating the local criminal environment, Both MS-13 and 18th Street have roots in Los Angeles but are now active in the NTCA embracing a network configuration.[30] In addition to these gangs, other Los Angeles gangs such as the Crips and Bloods have outposts in Belize (see figure 5).[31]

Figure 5: Gangs in Belize (Courtesy C/O Futures)

Brazil

Gangs in Brazil poses significant threats to the state, exercise territorial control and criminal governance, and wage violent armed campaigns, including orchestrating prison riots and the use of terrorist violence.[32] Criminal gangs or factions compete with each other, militias (*milícias*), and the state. Key groups include the Primeiro Comando do Capital (PCC), Comando Vermelho (CV), as well as others such as the Amigos dos Amigos, Terceiro Comando, and Terceiro Comando Puro. Figure 6 depicts the areas of influence/territorial control of gangs and militias in

Rio de Janeiro.[33] Brazil's largest gang the PCC is also a powerful global player leveraging an alliance with the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta to traffic cocaine to Europe,[34] Southern Africa, and East Asia.[35] The cocaine trade to Africa is on the rise.[36] Both Mexican Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG are also reported to be building a presence in Brazil.[37] In addition, the PCC has had links to former Colombian FARC guerrillas, recruiting these BACRIM (criminal bands) into their operations.[38] The PCC is also active in Paraguay.[39]

Figure 6: Gangs and Militias in Rio de Janeiro (Source: Disque-Denúncia)

Hybrid Threats: Fentanyl and Beyond

We briefly mention the global Fentanyl trade as a mechanism that both exploits and strengthens global illicit flows and alliances among criminal enterprises. Figure 7 illustrates the illicit strategic criminal flows exploited by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). These include illicit drug flows, illicit financial flows (such as money laundering and trade-based money laundering) and also exploit and empower gangs, mafias, and cartels.[40]
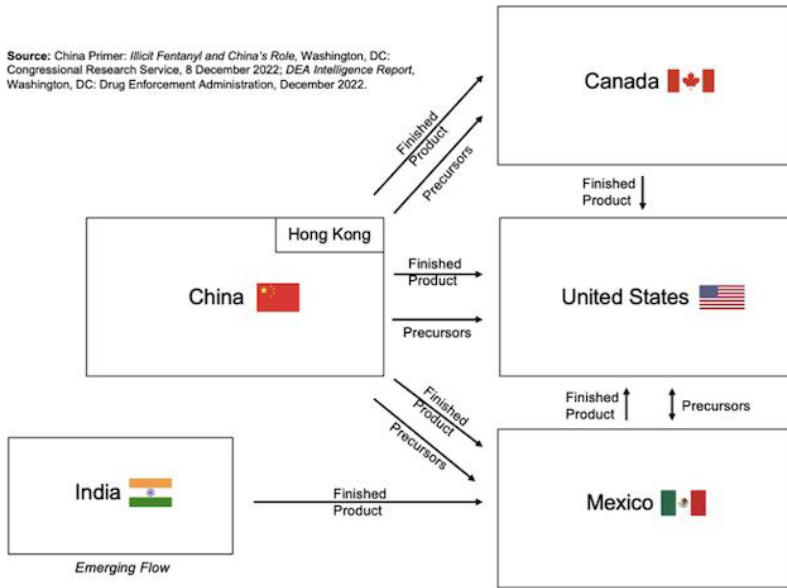
Figure 7: Illicit Flows of Fentanyl and Precursors into the United States

The illicit flows surrounding the global Fentanyl trade involves linkages among Mexican cartels, a range of local gangs in all of the locations participating in those flows. Further research is required to assess the active social networks involved (specifically the relationship among cartels, triads, gangs, and mafias, as well as corrupt links with government officials, and corporate officers (such as bankers). We believe the methodologies discussed here have promise in this regard. Specifically, we believe the analysis conducted by Oscar Contreras Velasco and coauthors on using algorithms to predict links in criminal networks has promise for identifying future alliances and revealing missing data (see Figure 8).[41]
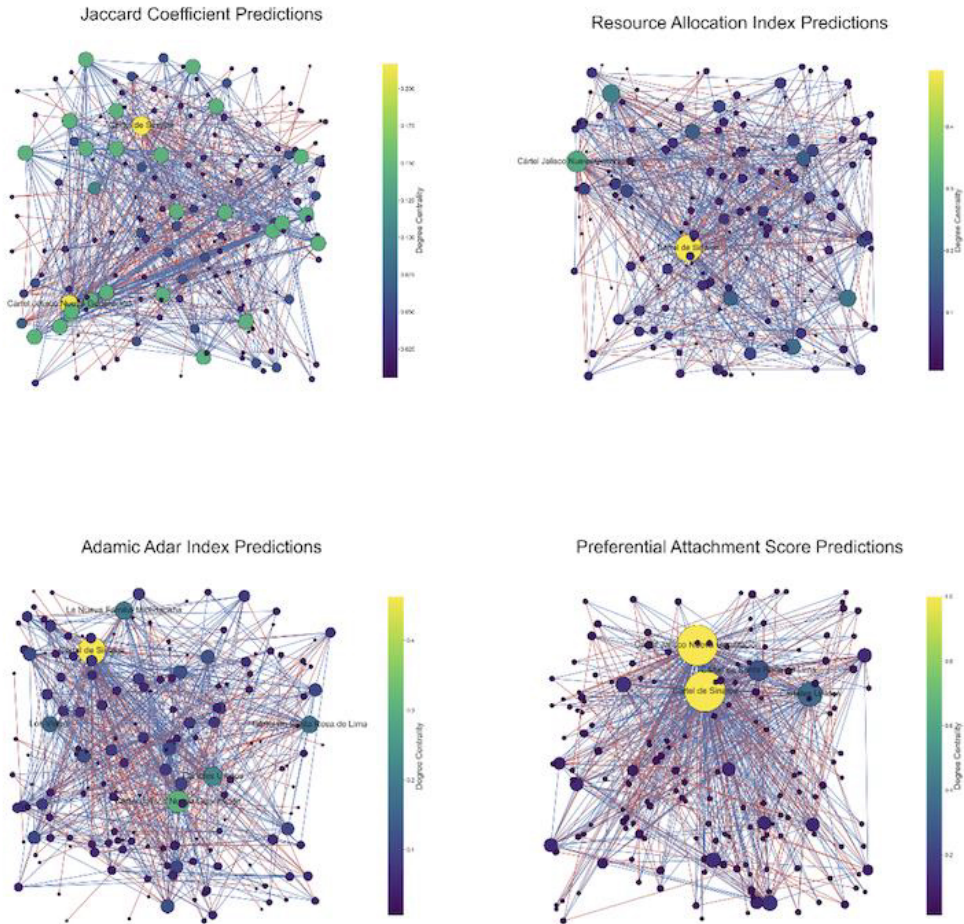
Figure 8: Predicted Connects Using Four Separate Algorithms
(Source: Contreras Velasco et al.)

Venezuela

Venezuela and its state connected organized crime makes for a fascinating case study of linkages to global illicit networks by domestic and transnational criminal organizations. Venezuela makes a good case study in part because of the thorough interpenetration of organized crime into the state.[42] It is an example of what Sullivan and other scholars have deemed 'state transformation' or 'state reconfiguration' by organized crime.[43] State transformation is a fascinating concept which seems a natural and needed step beyond/extension of earlier typologies of third generation gang literature, criminal insurgency literature, and also Lupsha's typologies of 'predatory,' 'parasitic,' and 'symbiotic' relationships between the state and organized crime.[44] State transformation is an apt extension; expanding both the third-generation gang literature and extending Lupsha's classic 1990s typology for organized crime state relationships.[45] Venezuelan Moises Naím's (Editor Foreign

Policy Magazine) famous for his book *Illicit,* has also written extensively on Venezuela as a mafia state in which the government functions as organized crime.[46]

Venezuela has, since the economic collapse it went through in the mid 2010s and continues to move out of under the Maduro regime, developed extensive organized crime penetration both inside and outside of the state apparatus. This organized crime penetration in some cases creates criminal controlled enclaves within major cities. In other cases, organized crime within the state has emerged.

State leadership figures play key roles in drug trafficking and smuggling using state resources. In particular, the Venezuelan military which was thoroughly controlled by allies of Hugo Chavez and later Nicolas Maduro, has become involved in the drug trade. 2020 indictments from the United States demonstrate that the Cartel de Los Soles (The Cartel of the Suns, so named for the Suns Venezuelan Generals use to mark their rank) is a network of corrupt government officials and organized crime working in Venezuela utilizing resources of the Venezuelan state to further their profits both for the state and for corrupt profit.

Due to the exodus of Venezuelans into countries like Colombia, Mexico, the United States, the Central and South American regions, among others, new economic markets have appeared. These new economic markets include oil smuggling and trafficking across the Venezuela Colombian border. There had long been intelligence suggesting that groups like the FARC or the ELN were moving into Venezuelan territory and using it as a safe haven as they fought the Colombian government under the Alvaro Uribe Administration (2002-2010). According to *Insight Crime* Chavez used the FARC and other Marxist guerrilla groups as a "strategic bulwark" against a stronger Colombia.[47]

In effect his support for them was an example of using guerrillas as a proxy and as a deniable hybrid threat to his enemies. But this process of involving the Venezuelan government with these illicit networks ultimately led to the increased involvement of Venezuelan government officials in the cocaine trade and other illicit activities. These Colombian rebel groups were known to operate within the cocaine trade and their respective global networks included linkages to Mexican cartels such as the Arellano Felix Organization better known as the Tijuana Cartel, in a drugs-for-guns relationships.[48] Sometimes these groups such as the FARC inserted themselves as negotiators between coca growers and traffickers. This allowed groups like the FARC to garner significant 'political capital' as Vanda Felbab-Brown argued in her book *Shooting Up* in 2009.[49]

President Alvaro Uribe strengthened Colombian Security capacity through programs like *Soldados de mi Pueblo*, which were able to extend Colombian government control and security provision further away from Colombian urban centers, into jungle, remote, and rural areas which the FARC and ELN had previously used as safe haven.[50] This increasingly pushed them into the arms of the Venezuelan government, which they would also fundamentally change.

Thus, we see here linkages between groups that operated in both Colombia and Venezuela, which were commonly cross-border in nature, in addition to their participation global cocaine markets. There is also significant smuggling across this international border between Colombia and Venezuela related to oil.[51] Further, Venezuela is now the starting point for significant migrant exodus which human traffickers can profit from, as recent reporting from the New York Times featuring local politicians in northern Colombia and Panama profiting from the new economy created by migrants as they attempt the dangerous cross across the Darien Gap.[52] While the Colombian government has reached a ceasefire with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios de Colombia* (FARC) as of 2016, this ceasefire has been incompletely implemented. While the majority of the FARC have disbanded, some extremist groups have continued on and the *Ejercito de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) has also proven to be of continued importance; in part because of its ability to find safe haven within Venezuelan territory.

Methods: Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis as applied to organized crime or "dark networks" has a long pedigree.[53] Dark networks include criminal networks, terrorists, insurgent networks, or any network which challenges the state.[54] Nonetheless, social network analysis (SNA) as a methodology in widespread use is relatively new. It is in part due to the advent of the personal computer and the widespread adoption of various social network analysis programs such as UCINET and increasingly the graphic program for exploratory social network analysis known as Gephi which is an open-source program.[55] Social network analysis focuses on the relationships between actors sometimes called nodes and the structure of networks. Scholars have increasingly pointed to the importance of social network analysis as a viable intelligence tool.[56]

This article presents a novel case based upon court documents of corrupt Venezuelan government actors who created a network of cocaine traffickers known as the *Cartel de Los Soles* or the Cartel of the Suns.[57] We will visually represent this network based upon a coding from unstructured court documents into a structured data source known as an edge list.

Table 1: Venezuelan State Organized Crime Nexus Indictments utilized for SNA.

Name of Indictment Analyzed	Case Number
United States v. Guiseppe Luciano Menegazzo Carrasquel et al.	No 2:10-CR-01462
United States v. Luis Alfredo Motta Dominguez, et al.	No. 1:19-CR-20388
United States v. Nicolas Maduro Moros	No.1:11-CR-205
United States v. Nestor Luis Reverol Torres, et al.	No. 1:15-CR-20
United States v. Vassyly Kotosky Villaroel Ramirez, et al.	No. 1:11-CR-247
United States v. Tareck Zaidan el Aissami Maddah, et al.	No. 1:19-CR-144
United States v. Luis Carlos de Leon-Perez, et al.	No. 1:17-CR-514

Cartel de Los Soles (Cartel of the Suns)

The Cartel of the Suns and the various corrupt government officials that were included in the various indictments released by the US Department of Justice in 2020 went to the highest echelons of the Venezuelan regime including Nicholas Maduro Moros himself, president of Venezuela.[58] Using a series of indictments profiled and released by the US Department of Justice in March of 2020, we coded 7 core documents (primarily indictments) into networks for analysis.

Network Results

These 7 indictments resulted in a network (Figure 9) with 35 actors or nodes and more than 61 edges or relationships. The average weighted degree of the network was 11.65, this means the average actor in the network had roughly 11 ties to other actors in the network. The overall network had a density of .103 which suggests a sparse overall network made up primarily of disconnected components. It is important to remember that these disconnected components may indeed be the result of missing information, which the US Department of Justice does not yet have or is unwilling to reveal at the time of these indictments. Indeed, it is plausible that the disconnected components cooperate with each other in a broader network structure. However, that evidence is not yet present here in these indictments.
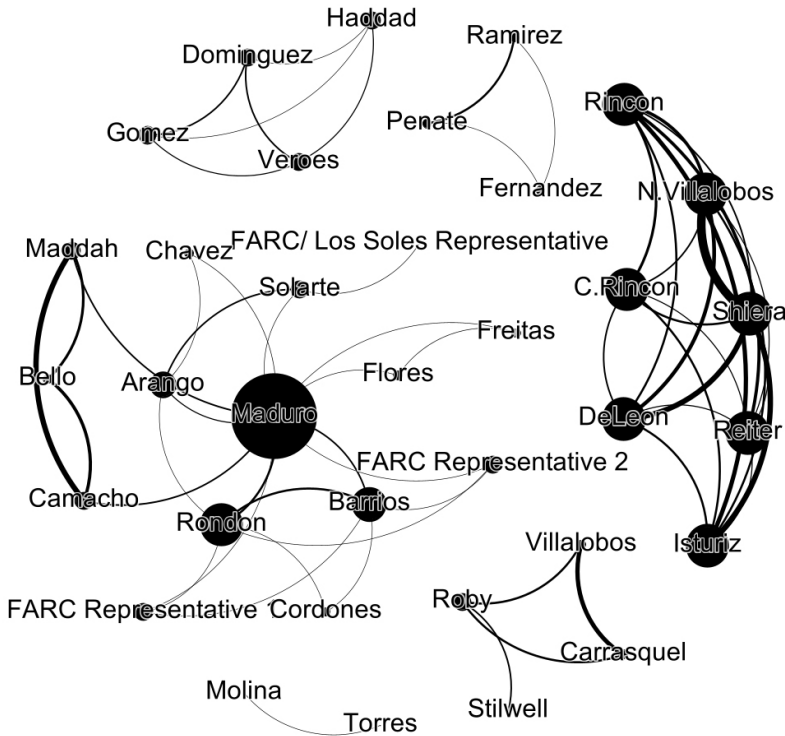
Figure 9: Six Components of a Venezuelan Corrupt State Transnational Network (Layout: Fruchterman Reingold/Nodes Sized on Degree Centrality) as Indicted by USDOJ March 2020. (Source: Authors' Elaboration)

There were roughly 6 components in this network with the primary or "giant component" including President Nicolas Maduro himself. Because of the disconnected nature of the networks some of our analysis will be on the overall network, while our analysis will then take a deep dive into the giant component of the network, which incorporates the highest levels of corruption organized crime and transnational connections.

The Maduro Component

In the next stage of our analysis, we drill down into the giant component within this six-component network. This component is comprised of Nicolas Maduro and the top figures within the Venezuelan regime which are indicted within this series of indictments. This component will henceforth be referred to as the Maduro component.

The Maduro component, depicted in Figure 10, is notable in several respects. First, it has an average degree of 3.467 which is lower than the overall component, though that may be a function of secondary component which has a significantly high number of edges within it (to be analyzed later). Specifically, the USDOJ evidence may have included many repeated ties because prosecutors had

better intelligence on that secondary component. Setting that aside for the moment, the average weighted degree of the Maduro component is 7.867; suggesting the average person in the network had a degree of seven (7 ties). The Maduro component diameter is only four, suggesting that even the people furthest apart in this component would only have to move through three other individuals to get across the network. The Maduro component graph density is 0.248 which is higher than the overall network, but is to be expected because this is a smaller network with 15 nodes and 26 total edges.
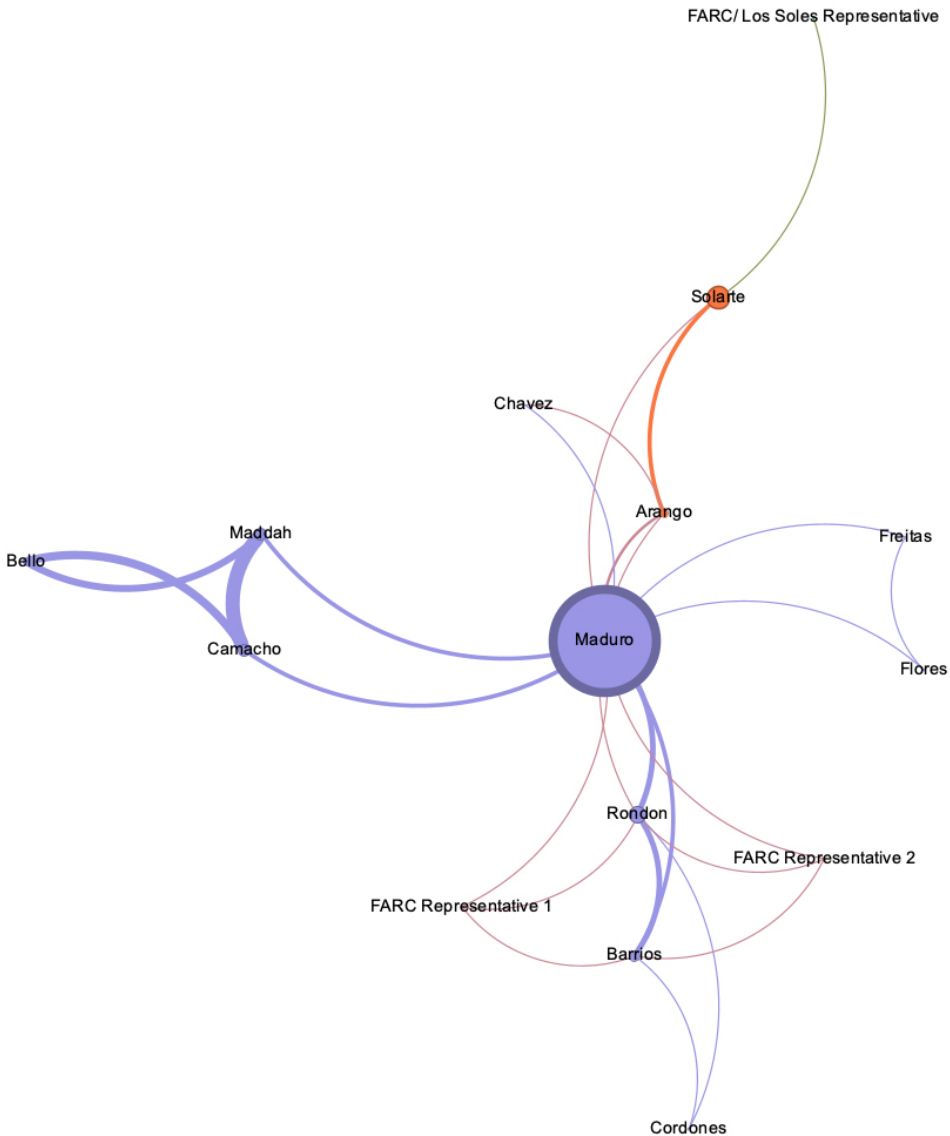
Figure 10: Maduro Component, Nodes sized on Betweenness Centrality, Color by affiliation (Source: Author's Elaboration based on Data from US Court documents)

Figure 10 above depicts the Maduro component of the network. It is color color-coded based on the affiliation of actors. In this component actors depicted in purple are Venezuelan government actors. Those depicted in orange are solely *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) affiliates, while actors depicted in green are FARC and Los Soles affiliates, suggesting that there may have been an individual with both affiliations. The presence of such actors is in itself evidence of strong cooperation between transnational criminal networks on a cross-border basis. It also suggests an institutionalized relationship between the FARC and Venezuelan organized crime. Within Figure 10 we see that the nodes are sized based on betweenness centrality. Betweenness centrality is a measure of how often an actor lies on the shortest path between other actors in a network.[59] In this network where we can see that Nicolas Maduro is the actor who lies on the most critical paths within this network.

The next section depicts the second largest component in the overall network. This dense "all channel" component still has variation within it in terms of the affiliations of the actors about half our Venezuelan government and half are unaffiliated, and also the strength of the ties between them. Strength of tie is depicted in this network based on repeated connections, i.e., someone who calls another person 10 times in a day is likely more connected to that person than dyad (pair of people) who only call once in a day. This is shown with thicker lines.
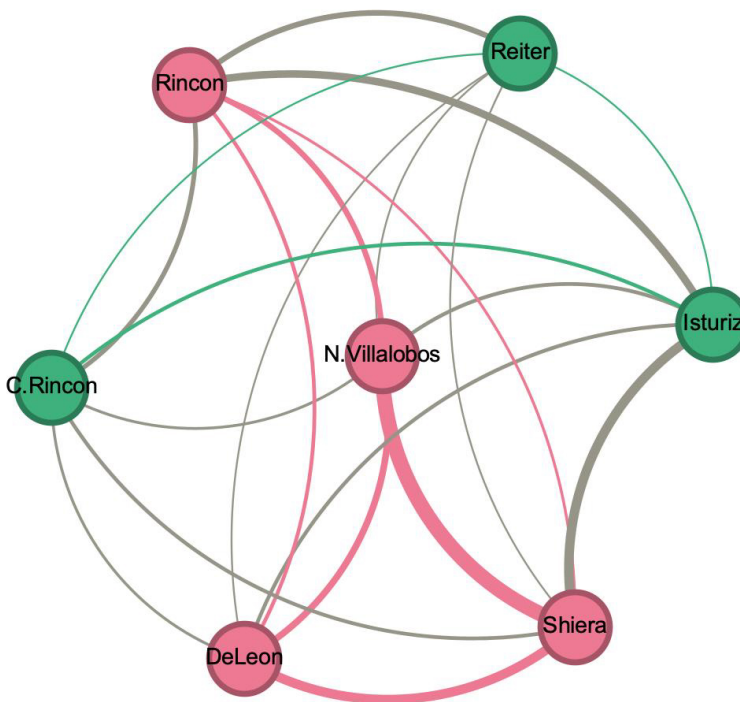
The Strong Tie Component

Figure 11: The Strong Tie Component.

In Figure 11 which we will refer to as the strong tie component we see a fully connected all channel network.[60] We also see the strength of tie depicted by repeated ties and depicted by line thickness. The actors' nodes are colored why their affiliation. Actors in pink are unaffiliated while actors depicted in green are Venezuelan government affiliated. Thus, we see tight interconnections between Venezuelan government officials and criminal actors which are unaffiliated with the Venezuelan government and may have transnational affiliations or business affiliations not depicted by the indictments.

Conclusion

Hybrid threats are frequently mentioned in relation to Russia, China, and Iran. Chinese criminal enterprises are linked with the Fentanyl trade and influence operations.[61] On China, in specific, these hybrid actions are accompanied by economic development and statecraft.[62] In addition to these known hybrid threats and strategic crime, we need to build an understanding of future crime-terrorism-gang nexuses[63] in order to discern the nature of networked global threats–especially those in Latin America and the Western Hemisphere at large.

The Venezuelan government has become famous for its high level of corruption, direct participation in organized crime activities, which include cross-border trafficking of oil, working with transnational criminal actors such as the ELN and the FARC, and indirect participation through the Cartel of the Suns in cocaine trafficking. It is well known that the cocaine market which spans from the Andean region, throughout the Western Hemisphere also moves through the Caribbean and into Europe among other vectors of traffic including high profit zones such as Australia.[64] Thus, we see the highly corrupt Venezuelan government, participating in significant global and transnational criminal ties embedded in a global network of organized crime actors.

Most notably, the economic calamity resulting from the Venezuelan government's mismanagement, also created mass refugee flows out of Venezuela. This has in turn allowed transnational actors and criminals to supply services for migrants via smuggling and trafficking.

Our social network analysis of US court documents has demonstrated the transnational connections and the organized crime activities of the Venezuelan government. These linkages include ties to the government's own Cartel of the Suns which is deeply embedded within the Venezuelan government and has ties to transnational criminal organizations such as the FARC. These in turn historically and currently have connections to Mexican OCGs which in turn have connections globally, including US-based street and prison gangs.[65]

The organized crime activities of the Venezuelan government and its networking with illicit networks, serve its foreign policy interests in terms of balanc-

ing against potential encroachment by the Colombian government but also serve as a source of funding for the Venezuelan government and its activities; including regime survival. The Venezuelan government alliances with illicit networks also serve as a hybrid threat against countries like Colombia. This is similar to the ways in which the Iranian government has utilized Hezbollah as a hybrid threat and proxy. Interestingly, Iran and Venezuela recently signed a 20-year cooperation agreement in June 2022 according to *Reuters*, demonstrating how networked alliances increase resilience of actors utilizing hybrid threats.[66]

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Endnotes

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